The Grass Is Green at Nixon Spas

By Jack Anderson

Mowing the lawns and trimming the hedges at the San Clemente and Key Biscayne retreats became affairs of state for top presidential advisers who saw to it that the taxpayers got clipped, too.

In letters and memos now in our possession, Nixon aides, confident that their prose would never be seen outside the President's tight circle, juggled the work schedules and the payrolls of the gardners to make sure the public paid.

The White House and the General Services Administration has insisted that most of this work was done to insure security. Our investigation suggests that the main purpose, as it would be with any other home owner, was to keep the grass short and the flowers blooming.

Beginning in September, 1969, the White Landscaping Co. was selected by GSA to manicure the presidential greens and grounds at San Clemente for $3,350 a month. Early in 1970, Sen. William Proxmire (D-Wis.) asked for an accounting of the public money that was being poured into President Nixon's vacation spas.

This touched off a sudden economy wave on the gardening staff. H.R. (Bob) Haldeman, the top presidential assistant until he was fired in the great tremors of the Watergate scandal, held an urgent discussion with Herbert Kalmbach, the President's lawyer.

To make sure Proxmire didn't find out what was going on, Haldeman sent stern instructions to GSA in a memo marked "CONFIDENTIAL/EYES ONLY."

"As far as the gardeners," directed Haldeman, "they will be reduced in number and the entire responsibility picked up by assigning one gardener to the Secret Service in place of (Brigido Damian) Garcia, who is now on their payroll, and moving Garcia to the owner's personal payroll."

No detail was too small for Haldeman's attention. He added: "Kalmbach feels that we do not need a housekeeper on a continuing basis, and that we can leave this the way it is, with the daily check being made as it is now, and the dusting, etc., required for readying the house to be carried out by our own crew just prior to a visit."

The contract with White's Landscaping was cancelled a week later on orders from Kalmbach, and a gardener was hired by the Secret Service from the landscaping company for $1,092 a month. Poor Garcia, who apparently was paid less, was employed directly by the President, but took his orders from the Secret Service's gardener.

White Landscaping didn't suffer in the deal but simply wound up with a new Coast Guard contract, where Proxmire would be less likely to detect it. The company was hired by the Coast Guard to trim the lawn around the Nixon staff offices for $2,477 a month.

But a memo for the file from John F. Galuardi, GSA's man in San Clemente, confided: "Kalmbach wanted to know if we could work it out so the men worked four days on the residence side and one day on the Coast Guard station side."

The Coast Guard, not eager to displease the commander-in-chief, agreed. Noted Galuardi: "GSA could contract for all the landscaping and Coast Guard would reimburse GSA. Coast Guard is checking with their district office for concurrence in this scheme."

Despite all the legerdemain, landscape architect Kenneth K. Kammeyer warned Kalmbach in a March 24 letter that there would be no savings.

"As we have previously stated," he said, "this cancellation (of White's contract) will cost more in the long run . . . And remember, we can grow a better quality garden than we can quickly move one in."

All these machinations, while they escaped poor Proxmire, have now been uncovered by Rep. Jack Brooks (D-Tex.) after a painstaking investigation by his House Government Operations Subcommittee.

Not surprisingly, the documents reveal that the taxpayers also had to foot the bill for landscaping work at "Project 500," the GSA code name for Key Biscayne.

In February, 1969, final plans for the landscaping were approved by representatives of the Secret Service and GSA. A contract award to the Bartlett Construction Co. included about $16,000 worth of landscaping.

Although some of the work was requested by the Secret Service "to perform its protective functions," a GSA memo indicates that the Nixons decided on some additional work.

The result of the President's changes was a contract modification increasing the cost to the taxpayers by $4,686, or 29 per cent above the original bill.

In addition, the GSA thoughtfully provided a new sprinkler system at a cost of $4,500; new sodding for the areas not planted with shrubs at a cost of $9,901; and the purchase of new shrubs and sod which, from December, 1972, through July, 1973, cost $4,930.30.

Footnote: Haldeman, through his attorney, sent word to us that he couldn't remember the transactions at all but the names were familiar. Kalmbach couldn't be teached for comment.

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